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AUSTRIA and AMERICA

By Rev. John S. Porter
of Prague

AMERICAN BOARD of COMMISSIONERS
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A QUARTERLY

Foreword

The smallest of the American Board Missions is that to Austria, with one station and two missionary families. But from that one station, Prague, and under the guidance of these few missionaries have gone forth evangelical influences that have reached many centers in Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and even in Russian Poland.

Moreover, this mission has done a large service to the United States through its contributions to the life of the Bohemian people of this country.

No mission of the Board has been more directly affected by the war or more heavily hit by it than this to Austria. The story of its experiences in these war times is full of interest and appeal. Mr. Porter has written of it as an eye witness and a fellow sufferer with the people of those stricken churches.

W. E. S.

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The War in Embryo.

"Bohemian Paradise" so-called was our outing place for the summer of 1914. There we heard the first mutterings of war. We went down the hill to see the trainloads of soldiers going to the front. The little city nearby quickly filled with uniforms. Schools and other public buildings were suddenly overflowing with soldiers whose temporary beds were simply a little straw laid on the floors. Portable war-kitchens, military wagons and horses were everywhere. All incoming trains brought new men reporting for duty. All was confusion and excitement.

Prague, our home, was only eighty miles or thereabouts distant and was ordinarily reached in upwards of three hours. It then seemed five hundred miles away. Duty called me thither almost every week's end; and once I rode all night on the return trip from Prague. I was glad, indeed, even thus to reach the place of our summer sojourn. To avoid the possible throwing of bombs from the train all windows were ordered closed as we approached bridges and tunnels. Tearful and heart-breaking good byes were the order of the day. People were afraid for their hoarded savings in banks. Uncertainty was in the air. We began to understand the meaning of war.

September found us all again in Prague. Some of our fellow members in the church had already left for the front; others were going. From our windows we could see soldiers drilling in four different places. We heard

Sketch Map of the Austria Mission.

the "pop pop" of the machine guns in drill practice. The "golden city of Prague" that has witnessed so many bloody wars was again alive with soldiers, munitions, implements

of warfare, and military supplies. Patriotic pictures, war maps and illustrated postal cards grew in the windows like mushrooms. Every mail brought new problems. Preachers were leaving for war camps. Money was not easily forthcoming. Checks from foreign countries could not be cashed. Bills must for a time remain unpaid. People were laying in supplies of all kinds. Without leaving our home we could see the soldiers marching to the sound of music toward the railway station to fill the long lines of waiting transports.

And the war was still in swaddling clothes when the same cars come back from the front with sick, mutilated and dying humanity. Our fair city to quote a newspaper, seemed "one huge hospital." From time to time many of our street cars put on the Red Cross instead of their usual designation and helped carry the sick and wounded to nurses and doctors.

Later came the drafts, ever more inclusive, until all from eighteen to fifty years of age capable of military duty had been pronounced *"tauglich,"* "serviceable" and had left. The men's side in many of our chapels was almost vacant. All sorts of adjustments were made to keep up our usual quota of services in the absence of one-half of our preachers. For in war, if ever, the regular ministrations of the gospel are needed.

The Question of Food.

Supplies came gradually to be the prevailing subject of conversation. People bought what they could, where they could and as much as they could. For a time salt

was more than a luxury. Bread tickets and other tickets came into vogue. We studied attentively the public sign boards to find when those under our house number could purchase potatoes of the city.

And here is a long line of men and women. What does it mean? They are waiting for kerosene oil. Farther along, the street is black with a crowd arranged by policemen in ranks of four. They are waiting for milk. Similar lines stand for hours to buy a little sugar, tobacco or soap. Coal, too, is very scarce. The country is settling down to grim war. Refugees from Galicia, Bukovina and elsewhere are being brought in to help lessen the supplies for our homes. Some school buildings are given up entirely to the wounded and sick soldiers. Others are doing double duty, that all the children may have school privileges. Canes and crutches appear in ever-increasing numbers on our streets. War is with us. We hope his stay will be short.

Whomever we meet and wherever we meet, war and supplies are the theme of conversation. New foods are introduced. We hear of new ways of cooking. An American paper that "gets through" has recipes. "Seventeen ways of cooking — ." Some one remarks "yes; seventeen ways of cooking what you haven't got." We learn that a farmer friend will sell us some flour. We make the long journey, willing indeed to take time and spend money to increase our store of supplies. Some one from the country, sends us a ten pound loaf of rye bread. It is better than gold.

But the days pass quickly. Our hands are full of work. Soldiers everywhere need a word of encouragement. Widows and lonely families crave a call. Notes of sympathy must often go here and there, as news comes of the wounded, sick, missing and dead. Letters come from our men at the front and elsewhere asking for testaments and gospels in different languages for comrades. And the city hospitals and lazarettoes have ever some of our soldiers that need cheer. Pastors and others from the country unite asking us to visit members and friends in Prague hospitals. And with so many ministers in the war, there are many and urgent calls to preach near and far, to baptize and to administer the Lord's Supper. And never was there a more hearty response to the gospel message. Soldiers on furlough are present. Others quartered nearby for a time are invited. Often men come in who speak a strange tongue to whom we can minister only by a handshake and by the message that love communicates without the use of words. Some that long ago heard the gospel and remained careless or became hardened are now driven by the exigencies of the war to God.

Never were we happier in the Lord's work; and never seemingly more needed. Then came the diplomatic break between Austria and America. There was a hurried consultation resulting in a decision to leave with the American Embassy. A few last things were done. Our faithful maid promised to do all that we could not. She is to be trusted fully to wisely distribute our supplies,

so laboriously gathered and carefully hoarded, to the needy in the church. She will occasionally air our apartment and serve elsewhere until we return. Our landlord, an American Bohemian, is perfectly willing to wait for rent until the war is over. And within thirty-six hours after we really know we are going, we are on the train for Vienna. We are off—can it be!—Off for America!

Austria Breaks With America.

Austria severed diplomatic relations with America at Easter time, 1917. And America declared war on Austria almost exactly eight months later. Few words suffice to tell all this. And yet these acts have had, and doubtless will still have, far-reaching results.

One of the immediate results of the diplomatic break, was the special train chartered by the Foreign Department of the Austrian government, which steamed out of the South Station in Vienna, April fourteenth of this year, with sixty-seven Americans on board. Members of the American Embassy, consuls of the United States and their families from all parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, physicians, Red Cross nurses, Y. M. C. A. workers, a representative of the Associated Press, and the two missionary families of the American Board made up the party.

As the train was leaving the station, there was subdued cheering on the part of the friends of the Americans, who were so suddenly leaving homes and work. Farther down the platform stood a group of Austrian officials,

grim, non-committal, with their black and silver uniforms.

What thoughts were in the minds of the people on the cars? And of what were those thinking who were left behind? Who can tell?

Work in Austria.

It is now just forty-five years since our missionaries made their first acquaintance with the people of Austria. The work was begun in both the northern and southern provinces. Gradually, however, it has been confined more to Bohemia and Moravia at the north, although the work in the south has never been abandoned. Hence, our center is the hundred-towered, golden Prague, "the Rome of the north," the capital of Bohemia, a city with suburbs of nearly five hundred thousand inhabitants.

Austria is a papal country. Upwards of ninety per cent. of the people are more or less—many of them less—connected with the Roman Catholic Church. Infidelity is rampant. Formalism is everywhere. Immorality blights. Beggary flourishes. Truth telling is all too rare. The Bible is little known. The people are "dead in trespasses and sins."

And yet it was not always thus. We think at once of John Huss, the great Bohemian reformer and martyr, who was burned at the stake in Constance, Germany, in 1415. Luther, one hundred years later, bore him this testimony, "In my opinion" said he, "John Huss bought with his own blood the gospel which we now possess." D'Aubigne calls Huss "the John the Baptist of the Reformation." He was surely "a burning and a shining light."

Execution of Nobles.

His ashes were thrown into the Rhine; but his spirit still lives in Bohemia, and in the world.

Bohemia, the birthplace of Huss is a land of martyrs. Even Armenia cannot excel Bohemia, with its long and shining list of those who have suffered exile and martyrdom for their faith. We in America are soon to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims. Bohemia lost her freedom just after the Pilgrims set foot on American soil. Her nobles were executed on the Public Square in Prague. The flower of her people went into exile or perished. The Bible was a forbidden book. The pall of Romanism fell upon the land. And for nearly three hundred years, Rome has held undisputed sway in Bohemia as well as in Austria.

Bohemia lost her freedom three hundred years ago. A longing for liberty has burned in the hearts of Bohemians for all these succeeding years, and centuries. And no wonder there is a hope that out of this world conflagration may come again a day of rejoicing to Bohemia, the heart of Central Europe.

Neither the American Board nor its missionaries go anywhere to mix in politics, national differences or animosities. We go to preach Christ and him crucified and risen again. Such has been our aim and purpose in Austria. We would simply help Christ carry out his program of love and mercy as he himself proclaimed it.

The Breaking of the Storm.

And the "gospel is the power of God unto salvation" in Austria even in war time. The war came suddenly, al-

though long presaged. The storm burst upon us with awful fury. People awoke that Sunday morning, July 26, 1914, to rush to bill boards to learn if their regiments or those of near relatives were already mobilized. I baptized that morning the sixth child of one of our Prague families. The father went immediately after the service to join his regiment. In the afternoon of the same day, I preached in another of our four Prague churches. On the way down in the street car, I met one of our members who was leaving his wife and seven small children. He had his Bible open even as he sat there in the car, to the ninety-first Psalm. As he read, "I will say of Jehovah, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust," he rested down on his God and was calm and confident. I have never seen a more quiet trust in God. That picture has strengthened me during all the months of the war.

We used to sing with our soldiers as they were to leave us:

"The Lord's my rock; in him I'll trust.
A shelter in the time of storm."

We prayed with them. According to Bohemian custom, we kissed them good bye. And away they went in the strength the Lord Christ gives. In their breast pockets they carried at least a Testament for their daily food. And often they had in their knapsacks, gospels and tracts for their comrades. For they went also as soldiers of Jesus Christ.

Trial of John Huss.

We have spoken of John Huss who laid down his life on a battlefield where the forces of the Church and State were arrayed against him. Not far from his birthplace, some years ago, a boy was born of humble Christian parents. He travelled the same long road to school as did Huss. After studying in Germany and completing his theological course in Scotland, he was finishing the required year of military duty and anticipating the active work of the ministry, when the outbreak of the war forced him into the army as an officer. He was twice severely wounded, once on the Serbian, and again on the Russian fronts. He has risen in rank. His breast is adorned with medals. We are still hoping that he will survive the war to preach the glad tidings to his fellow-men as did Huss.

Another young man, born in the same town as Huss, was in Russian Poland preaching the gospel, when the war came. His lot was that of all the other Austrian subjects in that section of Russia. He was interned in faraway Siberia, while his wife and child were left behind. He is doubtless a center of light in that great land.

And still another from the birthplace of Huss deserves mention. He moved thither from a nearby town for the express purpose of hearing the gospel. He soon accepted Christ; was drafted a few months later and went to the front. Everything has seemed against him, even wife and relatives. He was weak in body, often sick and worn. The Church and the One "that sticketh closer than a broth-

er," stood by him, and he has been a "faithful witness" everywhere. I found him in the hospital trying his best to communicate his joy in Christ to the Hungarian soldier who lay on the next cot. If you could have seen his face as I gave him a pocket Bible that he could hardly buy for himself!

Spreading One Good Seed.

Our people were planning even before the war, to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom of Huss. We hoped as a part of such celebration to carry the gospel in some way to all parts of Bohemia and Moravia. But the war came. Our hopes seemed blasted, but God answered our prayers better than we even dreamed. Men even from the very birthplace of Huss, have carried the gospel all up and down Austria and across Russia into Siberia.

And not only the aforementioned, but many others of our upwards of two thousand members of American Board churches have helped carry the gospel throughout Austria. And as war-captives in Russia, Italy, Servia and other parts of Europe, they have done far more for Christ than we could have imagined.

Soldiers from all parts of Bohemia, even from the remotest hamlets, were mustered into service in Prague and other centers where they were given gospels and Testaments by their fellow-soldiers or by Christian workers who came in contact with them in hospitals, barracks, or on the street. There has never been any such dissemination of the good seed of the Kingdom possible in Austria,

as has been seen during the war. Doors, long shut tight and fast, have all at once opened to the gospel of the printed page; and also to living testimony from God's children. Again and again have we received letters from our soldiers asking for copies of the Scriptures in various languages for comrades in arms.

One of our colporteurs conceived an unusual plan of action. He obtained a permit for two weeks, the like of which had never before been granted in Austria; *viz.* to sell and give away gospels and Testaments on the military trains that passed through the railway center, where he had his home. The long trains to and from the front halted there for a longer or shorter time. The Red Cross workers went through the cars with hot tea and coffee. Right behind them was the messenger of the Cross of Christ with the Word of Life. Eager hands of sick, wounded and well were stretched from all sides for the Scriptures.

Then the colporteur, too, was drafted, but he was providentially given a place as a nurse and has had unusual opportunities to be a witness to men of all ranks and nationalities and to circulate the Word of God among officers and privates.

Women and the War.

Women make up more than half of the church membership in many countries, and Bohemia is no exception. We often wonder if women are not the greater sufferers in the war. Be that as it may, no account of Christian work and suffering in Austria can leave out women.

There is Miss J. who has given her life to orphans and neglected children. You can imagine that her hands are more than full. The day of miracles has not passed. No, indeed. When food was lacking and there was no help in view, the workers and the orphans cried unto the God of the fatherless. And he heard, and answered. A whole bag of wheat was sent from an unexpected quarter. Supplies came in wonderful ways. Coal was scarce everywhere, but especially in the villages. A whole load was sent all the way from the city to the orphanage.

Miss V., a convert from the Jewish faith, is another worker in the orphanage. When the Jewish refugees from Galicia poured into Prague and the surrounding towns with all their filth and microbes, they were very unwelcome. Miss V. befriended them and devoted much time to their welfare; found them employment, circulated the Scriptures among them and gathered them to hear the gospel sung and preached.

Mrs. W. has worked and prayed and prayed and worked to pay the debts incurred by her unworthy husband before he left her. The debts are all paid; the large family of children clothed and fed, and last winter in the intense cold, she ministered to many hungry and cold soldiers. She invited them to her humble home and gave them hot soup and bread, and while they ate and drank, she sang to them of Jesus and told them of the Prince of Peace and gave them gospels and tracts.

Our pastor's slender wife in B., must, in her husband's absence as a soldier, care for the church, do the calling,

Prague and the River Moldau.

and occasionally go four or five miles on foot and bring home on her back some flour to eke out the scanty supply furnished by the city. Mrs. M., another pastor's wife, had just recovered from a severe illness when her husband was drafted. She is left with eight small children and the heavy end of the church work. Cheery and bright she is in spite of all. When we last saw her, she was just leaving for Moravia for supplies. The round trip would require twelve hours of journey by train and two on foot, and all this to get food for her family, to add somewhat to the all too little forthcoming in the city.

Our round of calls brings us in touch with families of ours who are living in wearing uncertainty. No reliable news has come from a father or husband or brother for months. Some one reports that he saw him fall in battle. But experience teaches that such news is to be taken with caution. "Is he dead? Is he still alive?" They wait and wait. They start with hope whenever the postman stops at their door. "No, nothing." They hope on. Our God is a "God of all comfort."

Foundations Sure.

The foundations of all mission work the world over, are seemingly tottering. Have we spent money and lives in vain? No; the war is deepening and broadening these foundations for a more spiritual structure, and the same is true in Austria.

Before the war, the Bible was almost the one book in many Christian homes. Our people usually have family prayers twice, if not thrice daily. But the war-experi-

ences have planted their feet more firmly on the Word. Verses often read, now have a new meaning. A handful of soldiers gathered outside some barracks or behind the lines at the front, meet and read the Testament with new faith. The foundations have deepened. The wife and mother at home has through her tears come closer to Christ. The old Bohemian fathers, three hundred years ago, left all, lands and estates, and with their Bibles and hymn books went into exile or to death for their faith. Will Bohemia become once more the land of the Book? Is the war the harbinger of better days?

The foundations are only *seemingly* shaken. Reports from the battlefields confirm this statement. A careless backslider was rarely in church; was cold and bitter. In the army he came to himself and back to God. A soldier returning from the front with bandaged head, remarked: "Out there," pointing away toward the Russian front, "one learns to prize the Bible." A member who had given us concern when at home, wrote in a new vein from a place of great danger. Letters from the front stimulated our faith and that of our churches. God is building better than we know, even when the great guns shake the hills.

"Faith of our fathers, living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword."

War drives many a man farther *from* God. War, also helps bring many a man nearer *to* God. Thousands in Europe are reading Bibles today that would have spurned the thought before the war. Scoffers, before the war, are

today seekers or at least willing listeners. Soldiers were coming to our services, who understood only the "Amen." They wanted to be where the gospel was preached. A young man went to the army a Romanist. He had never attended the gospel services near his home. Someone sent him while in the army, a Testament, and he returned home on furlough to welcome the first opportunity to worship with the people of God.

Our people had their eyes on a little city with the great desire to give it the gospel. All efforts seemed unavailing. Far away in Hungary, a soldier from that city was convalescing. As he went one day in the garden back of the hospital, he accosted a comrade reading a Bible, with, "What are you reading?"

"God's Word," was the answer.

"I would like to read it too."

"All right, take off your cap, throw that cigarette away. We must reverence God's word."

This was the beginning, and the man with the Bible led his comrade to Jesus. Then the doors were wide open, through this soldier, for the gospel to enter into the city so long closed. These are but illustrations of the way the Kingdom is coming in spite of war and through the war. We are sowing in tears; but we shall reap with joy.

Austria in America.

Austria is debtor to America, and America is also deeply indebted to Austria. The two countries are inseparably linked. No diplomatic break can sever the ties that bind

the people of these so diverse countries together. Children are laborers here; their parents are across the sea, or vice versa. Even in the time of the Civil War, Bohemians were among the first who left Chicago to do service for our country under the name of "The Lincoln Rifles;" and hundreds of our Bohemian and Slovek Americans are now in training to fight our battles for us.

Christian Slavs, too, are doing valiant service in our warfare with sin and infidelity, as well as anarchy throughout America. Our Northwest has a progressive Slavic worker who is battling for better schools and more self-sacrificing loyalty in his section. This, aside from preaching the gospel in two languages. The daughter of one of our pastors in Bohemia wears the badge, "Travellers' Aid" at one of our great western railway stations in America. She offers timely aid to women and girls, native and foreign, who might otherwise fall into the hands of the Red Light district.

One of the most wide-awake evangelistic churches, in almost our largest American city, is Bohemian. Around this church are hotbeds of sin and ignorance, anarchy and infidelity, mixed with throttling superstition. In that church are many awakened and converted in Bohemia. A social settlement worker in a godless city in the heart of America, hails from Bohemia. Several of our former workers in Bohemia are doing valiant service in the coke regions of Pennsylvania. The "big brother" to the immigrants of all nationalities in a great manufacturing city of the United States is a Christian Bohemian.

Our Christian schools for training young women to work among all our foreign-speaking peoples here in America are ever looking to our churches in Bohemia for recruits. Here and there all over America are workers who look over the seas when speaking of their spiritual birthplace. The work among the five million Slavs of America would be largely at a standstill were it not for the workers who have come from Austria.

China has a missionary trained in Bohemia. Africa has claimed one of our Prague young women. South America has its quota from the churches of Bohemia, and Canada as well. Russia and Bulgaria have profited from Bohemia.

Bohemia is indeed, a little country. But as in the past, so now, streams of living water flow thence to water and refresh many a parched and desolate field, the wide world around. Bohemia is in the heart of Europe. Bohemia is fitted by location as well as by language and race to be a prime factor in carrying the gospel to the one hundred and fifty million of Slavs in Europe, Asia and America.

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